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## COLONIAL CITIZENSHIP: POWER AND STRUGGLE IN VIEQUES, PUERTO RICO

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I am honored to participate in this volume that acknowledges Tony Lauria's contribution to building a critically engaged anthropology. Tony launched my career and that of many other young scholars. In doing so, he nurtured scholarship in the United States that addressed the contemporary Puerto Rican reality with a concern for social inequality, national identity, and struggle.

Tony's intellectual concerns guided and supported my inquiry. Tony has long been interested in critical engagement with anthropological knowledge in a way that considers the concrete local manifestations of colonialism and other forms of power. These concerns have guided my work as I examined the impact of military training exercises on the residents of Vieques Island, and the social movement that eventually evicted the U.S. Navy. Vieques Island, a Puerto Rican municipality that doubled as a theater of war, is a very dramatic expression of the unequal relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico, and the way that military interests trump civilian concerns. Although I would not say that Vieques is a microcosm of the so-called special relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico, it illuminated and continues to illuminate ongoing tensions that stem from Puerto Rico's lack of sovereignty and voice over its destiny.

As an anthropologist, Tony has considered the way culturally specific forms of power, dominance, and solidarity are expressed on the ground. Over most of the past century, conflict and struggle in Vieques, Puerto Rico have been shaped by two overlapping forces: the U.S. Navy and the U.S. government. The U.S. Navy, through its occupation, live bombing practices, and environmental destruction, created a subsistence crisis that is at the core of ongoing grassroots protest movements in Vieques. Most analysis of conflict around military bases assumes that nationalist ideology is a central motivating factor beneath expressions of discontent (Smith 2000). In Vieques, however, it becomes apparent that conflict has its foundation in the material

conditions of everyday life. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, Vieques is one of the poorest municipalities in Puerto Rico, with 65 percent of the population under the poverty level. It has the highest rate (81 percent) of child poverty in the Commonwealth and 20 percent of its youth drop out of high school. Vieques has among the highest infant mortality rates in Puerto Rico and a growing rate of cancer and other health problems that residents believe are caused by weapons testing. Although military bases are commonly assumed to provide jobs and economic growth for surrounding communities, the military's legacy in Vieques has been poverty and stagnation. What the recent mobilization in Vieques made clear was that the material harm caused by the military—the destruction of the ecology, the health effects of weapons testing, the squelching of economic development, the navy's dislocation of and antagonism toward civilians—was the basis of protest.

Vieques' discrete local grievances with the navy, however, became enmeshed in broader political controversies connected to the geopolitical interests of the U.S. military and the colonial relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States. Vieques is a municipality of Puerto Rico, a non-sovereign territory of the United States. Its residents are U.S. citizens who serve in the U.S. armed forces and can be drafted to fight in times of war, but who have neither political representation in Congress nor the right to vote for president. U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico operates through a combination of coercion and consent. The predicament of Vieques, an inhabited bombing range, illustrates the more naked forms of domination: the usurpation of national territory and the exercise of power in the face of widespread discontent. But colonialism is also maintained through consent. The extension of U.S. citizenship in 1917 to Puerto Ricans effectively silenced more vigorous protest by offering individuals the rights of citizenship even while denying Puerto Rico a place in the American polity. Puerto Rican

citizens have freedom of movement to the United States and privileged access to the labor market denied their Latin American neighbors. They have high rates of participation in the U.S. military and live on an island with a strong presence of U.S. armed forces and bases. Political debate in Puerto Rico is shaped primarily by autonomism, the struggle to advance local interests within the colonial framework. A vocal minority advocates independence, radicalizing political discourse, and tapping into widespread cultural nationalism (Ayala 2003:217). Yet the large majority of the Puerto Rican population is politically moderate, preferring continued political and economic ties to the United States, even while maintaining a deep-seated sense of Puerto Rican identity (Dávila 1997; Duany 2001; Morris 1995).

Conflict with the military exposes the ambivalence about citizenship, sovereignty, and national identity that are at the heart of Puerto Rican society (see Flores 2000, Negrón-Muntaner and Grosfoguel 1998). As both a potent symbol of American influence and a powerful actor in island affairs, the U.S. military evokes charged debates over loyalty and identity. In general, opposition to the military is viewed as part of the anti-colonial movement. What is peculiar about Vieques' struggle is how residents have struggled to assert specific material grievances that are a fundamental consequence of Puerto Rico's political domination by the United States and its armed forces, while avoiding the delicate and broader issues of sovereignty.

What Tony encouraged me to see in Vieques was not only the way that U.S. power was negotiated in Puerto Rico, but also the very vibrant ways people responded, thwarted, and engaged that power. In Vieques, people adopted culturally meaningful forms of expression—fisherman-led protests, casita building land occupations, lively musical pickets—to support a kind of popular sovereignty movement that was so powerful that it dislodged the mightiest military in the world from its prized training ground.

Today in Vieques, residents are faced with multiple challenges posed by environmental contamination, degradation of public health, the imposition of a wildlife refuge, and rapid gentrification. Islanders continue to rely on social mobilization to hold the military and state accountable for cleanup and sustainable development. Since 2003, activists have organized numerous acts of civil disobedience, including marches and setting up encampments on restricted beaches in eastern Vieques, demanding that the federal government clean up the area and return it to residents.

These acts of civil disobedience have had a demonstrable effect on the cleanup process. The navy initially devoted itself to removing ordnance only from the western side of Vieques, a smaller, more manageable operation than addressing the catastrophic mess in the east. Protestors' continued defiance, however, in entering into restricted eastern lands, demonstrated that the land was meant to be used by people, not just pelicans. This forced the navy to shift gears and begin cleaning up in the east. In addition, activists' continued opposition to the open detonation of ordnance in the cleanup process forced the EPA to set up an air-monitoring station.

As Vieques residents struggle for access to land and participation in local decision making, they confront broader questions of political authority, control over natural resources, definitions of common property rights—in sum, the rights and privileges of citizenship. The struggle of Vieques remains fundamentally an expression of asymmetrical power relations between the United States and Puerto Rico and the island's lack of sovereignty. As Vieques residents demand a voice in the future of the island, however, as they struggle for accountability and environmental remediation, they lay the groundwork for the self-determination.

I would like to end with a story, to bring Tony back into focus. When I was conducting fieldwork in Vieques, the house I shared with an elderly Vieques woman was burglarized and ransacked one rare evening when we were both out. Thieves stole my friend's TV, VCR, and entire collection of video tapes (leaving behind only one copy of *The Ten Commandments* with Charlton Heston). They ransacked my room, took some inexpensive jewelry, a small amount of cash and my tape recorder. Fortunately, I had hidden my laptop in a utility closet, and the island is "small town" enough that the thieves didn't bother stealing the *gringa's* easily recognizable blue bicycle. Break-ins were increasingly the norm in the neighborhood where I stayed, as the relatively large homes, many owned by North Americans, were fairly isolated and attracted thieves.

When I told Tony what happened, he was immediately alarmed. Did the navy send in goons to rattle me? Were the police once again up to no good? Was the FBI in on my case, harassing me for researching the military? We discussed the situation for some time.

No, it turns out it, the FBI were not behind the break-in: it was executed by a local drug addict, feeding his habit. I've learned enough about Puerto Rican history to know that politically charged incidents and harassments do happen and have

happened. What I took from this incident, however, was the overriding concern Tony had for me as his student, for my safety and well-being. But perhaps more significantly, it was flattering to think that he believed in the importance of my research, that it was significant enough to merit FBI surveillance and harassment by the navy. I hope I one day earn that ambivalent status, to produce scholarship that has that kind of impact, and I thank Tony Lauria for believing that my work has that potential.

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